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ABSTRACT

McGuffey's "Eclectic Readers" were a pervasive educational influence for almost 100 years in America and over 122 million copies were published before their use began to decline in the 1920s. Originally the work of William Holmes McGuffey, born in 1800 and raised on the Ohio frontier, the first McGuffey's readers appeared in 1837: a primer, four readers, and a speller. The readers had pictures on every page and stories almost always had a moral and a connection to God. Eventually 6 graded readers were produced and revised frequently over the next 83 years; they have never actually gone out of print and, as of 1978, were still in use. McGuffey's readers helped standardize education, spelling, and language. Their success at helping to shape the morality, culture, and literacy of American children presents a fascinating and instructive lesson for today's educators. (CR)

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McGuffey's Readers

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Education 131e- Elementary Reading

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When I was growing up, our neighbor was Louis Maggora, a retired railroad conductor and widower, who became a surrogate grandfather to us children. He was well read and had a dry, self- deprecating wit. At the turn of the century, he had to leave school to go work for his father . Whenever an event or personality in the news puzzled him, his favorite line was: "All I know is what I learned in McGuffey's Third Reader."

I never paid much attention to that remark. "McGuffey" was just a funny sounding name-- it had no significance for me. McGuffey's Eclectic Readers, however, were a pervasive educational influence for almost 100 years in this country, during a time of westward expansion, assimilation of an immigrant population, and formation of a national character. "...the McGuffeys enjoyed a popularity west of the Alleghenies and south of the Mason-Dixon line exceeded only by that of the Bible. Over 122,000,000 copies of the readers were published before their use began to decline in the 1920's, and most of these copies passed through the hands of at least five or six students" (Lindberg, 1976).

The Readers were originally the work of William Holmes McGuffey. Born in 1800, he was raised on the Ohio frontier. He was a prodigy, showing a remarkable ability to learn Latin and memorize entire books of the Bible. At the age of 26, he became a professor of languages, and at 29, licensed to preach in the Presbyterian Church. At the age of 36, he became President of Cincinnati College, his fame as a lecturer on biblical and moral subjects spreading rapidly. He worked to secure the passage of the law under which the common schools of Ohio were formed. From 1845 until his death in 1873, he was a professor of moral philosophy at the University of Virginia (Dictionary of American Biography, 1933).

A stern looking man reputed to have little sense of humor, daguerreotypes

taken of him show a man with a high forehead and piercing eyes, dressed in a stiff, high collared coat. He was highly respected in educational circles for "his care for the public interests of education; his lofty devotion to duty [and] his conscientious Christian character " (Westerhoff, 1978). Because of this, in 1836 he was approached by Winthrop Smith, an aggressive young Cincinnati textbook publisher, to write a series of primers for elementary schools. In 1837, the first McGuffey's Eclectic Readers appeared, 5 by 7 1/2 inches, bound in green cardboard. There was a Primer, four Readers, and a Speller. Unlike previous primers such as the staid New England Primer, the Readers had attractive pictures on every page. There were stories about children playing and behaving as children do. "In the McGuffey's illustrations children taught each other, talked with their parents, played with their pets" (Ruggles, 1950).

Each section of the Readers presented a story, almost always with a moral, and a connection to God. About 50 new vocabulary words were introduced in each lesson of the First Reader, many more in the subsequent Readers. Study questions were posed at the end of each section. Advice to teachers in the front of the books suggests that the children first read each story aloud; they are then asked to retell the story in their own words; finally they are asked the questions at the end of the chapter, all to make sure that the story has been understood and the "lesson" learned (Westerhoff,1978). Teaching was by repetition and memorization.

Eventually six graded Readers were produced, and revised frequently over the next 83 years (they have never actually gone out of print). These books were not "graded" analogous to grades as we know them today. Most rural schoolchildren never got past the Third Reader; it was read by the equivalent of our fifth and sixth graders. Higher Readers had a broad subject range ("eclectic" means to borrow from many sources), with lessons on farming, science, history and biography, in addition to

many literary selections. Many schoolchildren got their first (and only) taste of serious literature from the Readers. "There can be little question that the McGuffey Readers- particularly in the earlier editions- were far more demanding and challenging than most present day school texts" (Lindberg, 1976).

McGuffey's Readers helped to standardize education, spelling, and language at a time when America, with the common school movement, westward expansion, and foreign immigration to the United States, most needed it. At least as importantly, however, they helped to shape many generations of Americans' morality, values, and modes of conduct: honesty, patriotism, obedience, piety, kindness, thrift, and industry. Their omnipresence aided in forming our world view. They "helped to shape that elusive thing we call the American character" (Commager, 1960). As much as any other influence, they helped to imbue American culture with a strong Protestant ethic, which is still present today: "McGuffey's books...assumed and took for granted the universal acceptance of orthodox Protestant morality, particularly the Calvinist emphasis upon the rewards inherent in hard work" (Encyclopedia of Educational Research, 1982).

The age of McGuffey's Readers was the age of Horatio Alger and upward mobility, of "rags to riches." These were the democratic values that were being accepted en masse as our country coalesced from a loose collection of states before the Civil War to a Federal entity following it. By championing hard work as its own reward, the Readers were an implement of this nascent democracy.

Why were McGuffey's Readers so popular? Certainly there were other textbooks offering more or less the same fare-- textbook publishers even borrowed freely from each other. Probably the single largest reason was the aggressive promotion of the publisher, Winthrop Smith. He employed agents throughout the

rapidly expanding frontiers, some of whom were reputed to have bribed school boards. Although the Readers contained highly moralistic lessons, they carefully avoided taking on slavery (which the New England textbooks did), thus assuring their acceptance in the South. When the Civil War embargoed trade with the South, Smith arranged to have the book's plates smuggled to Nashville, where the Readers were published throughout the War, ensuring a postwar monopoly (Lindberg, 1976).

McGuffey's Readers eventually took on lives of their own, separate from both their creator and original publisher. William Holmes McGuffey's involvement ceased after his move to Virginia in 1845, and much of the work compiling subsequent editions was done by his brother Alexander, 16 years younger. Eventually the McGuffeys' involvement petered out, but the clout of their name ensured many more editions of the Readers. The 1879 edition, the most popular of all, had no McGuffey involvement, and by that time, Smith had sold out to the American Book Co. Eventually seven different publishers produced the Readers.

Didactic and moralistic as they were, McGuffey's Readers accomplished their goal-- they did a creditable job of educating American children, particularly in language arts. At least as of 1978, they were still in use in some school districts (Westerhoff, 1978), primarily rural, conservative districts with strong Christian parent populations. With today's concern over students' lack of reading skills and the "back to basics" cry, the Readers are frequently cited by critics as examples of what was right with American education. "They are frequently the texts called for by outraged parents and other critics who are alarmed by the fact that so many of today's students are little better than functional illiterates" (Lindberg, 1978). Waxing rhapsodic about the schooling of their youth, the Federated McGuffey Society still holds an annual meeting in Oxford, Ohio, near the house that McGuffey built there in 1833.

William Holmes McGuffey and the Readers he gave birth to deserve to be considered among the great landmarks of American education. No other textbook bearing the name of its author has ever come close to selling as many copies. The contributions of our educational giants such as Dewey and Mann are well known, but McGuffey was much more highly regarded and well known among the "common people." "McGuffey...represents an anomaly in history. He remains one of those persons whose influence is still testified to by great numbers of average citizens, but whose life and work are more often than not neglected or shunned by scholars" (Westerhoff, 1978).

No other textbook will come close to being as pervasive as the Readers were during their time. But their success at helping to shape the morality, culture, and literacy of America from 1837 to the 1920s presents a fascinating and instructive lesson for today's educators.

RESOURCES

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